

## Urban identity and lifestyles of gated communities in Egypt

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**ABSTRACT:** At the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the urban landscape faced a rapid and dramatic increase in Gated Communities (GCs) in most of the cities around the world. As part of the trend in suburbanisation, such changes in the urban environment are often due to change in lifestyles, which is an important factor in urban identity. This paper represents the ways GCs are identified and defined in Egypt, and focuses on identifying the main lifestyle factors influencing their urban identity. These factors should be taken into account by planners, designers and policymakers to minimise negative impacts and maximise positive consequences. The findings confirm that GCs of Egypt have special lifestyle characteristics. The paper makes some suggestions for strengthening and sustaining the remaining urban identity of gated community features that are likely to be part of the urban landscape for a long time.

*Key words:* urban landscape; urban identity; residential gated community; lifestyle

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The notion of identity is a set of meanings that reflect local traditions, culture and aspirations. It reflects their needs, their successes, their failures and their future. At the urban level, identity can be defined as a process where people interact with places and describe themselves in terms of belonging to a specific place (Lynch, 1981). Its concept has gradually become a major issue in contemporary urban planning due to changing lifestyles in most cities worldwide. Urban identity has an influence on cities and their users, and its continuity is an essential tool in creating meaningful and liveable cities.

The issue of urban identity in Egypt is not a new topic, but reviewing and evaluating urban identity in new gated communities (GCs), which are located in the extensions of Cairo city towards new cities, as their numbers increase makes the challenge of maintaining urban identity appear to be one of the biggest tasks of this century.

#### 1.1 *Object of the research*

The main question concerns local identity and the differentiation between GCs, as many have a kind of international identity (Italian, Greek, etc.). Therefore, the research question is 'How to manage the change and sustain the remaining urban identity of GCs?' This entails a review of the ways GCs are identified and defined in Egypt, identification of the main factors influencing their urban identity, and reviewing the various lifestyles offered by specific GCs in Egypt.

#### 1.2 *Research methodology*

The research methodology was based on an inductive approach through a theoretical study of the phenomena of GC and the concept behind their spread, by defining the various

categories of GCs and their main features. The history of GCs in Egypt and their associated lifestyles, and deducing the relationship between their lifestyle and mass media was also studied. A deductive and analytical approach was used on a case study of various categories of GCs in Egypt. Analysis of lifestyle factors that influenced urban identity was then carried out in order to identify which GCs offered a unique identity and lifestyle.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THIS STUDY

### 2.1 *The phenomenon of gated communities*

In the late twentieth century, an ancient urban form began to reappear in modern settlements (Judd, 1995). After several centuries, there were many definitions used to conceptualise the phenomenon of GC. This paper defines GCs as self-contained separate communities with carefully constructed identities (Baycan-Levent & Gülümser, 2004) where entry is controlled and public open spaces are privatised (Low, 2003). They have emerged as a new trend in the housing market, appearing comparable but likely differing in their history, reasons and physical features (Low, 2001). According to Blakely and Snyder (1997), there are three main categories with different degrees of facilities, exclusivity and security. The first type of lifestyle communities often highlights leisure activities, with recreational amenities, facilities and shared services at their centre. The second type is a prestige community that often highlights the attractive richness of its environment and the quality of security, concentrates on exclusivity and privacy over community, and does not often include common facilities. The third type is secure communities with controlled traffic and maintenance of property values, which reflected people's fear of crime. In the next section, a review of the types of GCs that were identified and defined in Egypt will be given.

### 2.2 *Gated communities in Egypt*

GCs demonstrate a new phase in the urbanisation of Egypt. They first appeared as summer and 'rest houses' in the coastal zones but, by the mid-nineties, the Egyptian government began to search for new urban developments where the housing communities were the main spine. The government sold large portions of public land to the private sector that offered new options for standards and styles of living with unique urban identities. There are a number of variables which played an important role in reshaping the visual perception of the urban identity through the intensive use of globalised lifestyles; these attracted people by focusing on visions and modernity through media and marketing advertisements. In addition, they appear to guarantee an idealised vision of an appealing lifestyle. The field study will analyse the urban identity and lifestyle of GCs in Egypt.

#### 2.2.1 *Lifestyle of gated communities*

Development companies represent GCs as a complete lifestyle rather than a house in a residential environment. This given lifestyle is pre-designed, planned and constructed to fulfil the demands and needs of every social class. According to Bali (2009), the identity of residents that belong to a city has been replaced by belonging to a lifestyle offered by a GC; it is called 'town citizenship' (Aydın Yönet & Yirmibesoglu, 2015). Nevertheless, there still appears to be a sense of belonging to or identification with a GC. Mutual relations associated with a specific identity in a sociocultural setting establish a sense of community in combination with physical measures; this can lead to an 'us and them' community. The gates have a double function of social control, as they include look-alikes and exclude those who are different; residents identify themselves with a social form, which is influenced by internal and external forces (Aalbers, 2003).

#### 2.2.2 *Lifestyle and mass media*

In the contemporary world, the impact of mass media or mass advertising on showing individuals' status or the formation of their status cannot be ignored. As a matter of fact, these

instruments inspire people to mass consumption. GC advertising commercials often tell of a lifestyle. They promise that residents will belong to a specific social environment thanks to the leisure activities provided within the community, and that children can safely run in the garden and participate in various activities. Generally, the declaration of the architectural style, or a design characteristic of a famous architectural style, and the lifestyle would be enough. On the other hand, GCs have recently started to include middle-income groups in the promotion of these projects, emphasising the price range and the payment schedule as well as the social activities and constructional attributes, while marketing material that targets the upper classes gives information about specialised sports facilities and shopping centres specialised for high-income groups. Thus, the promise of community lifestyle became a good marketing tool.

### 3 APPLIED RESEARCH

As of 2010, there were more than 450 GCs and their numbers are still on the increase (Soliman Muawwad et al., 2011). Most are located in new urban areas found east and west of Cairo, where they form an extension of Cairo city in the direction of the new cities of New Cairo, 6th of October and Sheikh Zayed. Therefore, the applied research within this paper analysed many patterns of urban identity in one of the most important and fast-developing regions on the edge of Cairo city.

#### 3.1 *Types of gated communities in Egypt*

Through observations during site visits, analysis of features and promotional data, four categories of GCs were identified. These were primarily based on physical features, characteristics that form each type, residents' lifestyle and identification of housing types.

##### 3.1.1 *Luxurious gated communities*

Luxurious GCs are similar to prestige GCs; however, they differ in the diverse social status of their residents, and segregation from the rest of the community remains the main reason to live in them (Aalbers, 2003). These types of communities are completely gated. The developer targets the upper-high economic class by presenting a new concept in the Egyptian urbanisation experience (Charmes, 2012). The resident lifestyle in this kind of GC offers groups of features; for example, security, facilities, amenities, richness of landscape views, privacy and the best property values. An example of such GCs are Allegría, Westown City, PalmHills.

##### 3.1.2 *Moderate gated communities*

Moderate GCs are similar to the lifestyle-type GCs but with some different characteristic elements. The developers are highly concerned about the quantity of units in the community in order to achieve the best profitability, so apartment building is the predominant type. They also have an exclusive medium-cost residential subdivision which has moderate features and amenities, some of which are not completely gated. This means that they are partially open to the public and depend on the potential business of non-residents, as well as residents, in the use of shared recreational facilities (Almatarnah, 2013). This sharing of lifestyle choice with others from outside the gated community does bring with it security issues (which may be a minor secondary factor). Examples of this type of GC are El Rehab city located in New Cairo city.

##### 3.1.3 *Lower-high gated communities*

The form of housing in this type of GC appears to be different. Apartment buildings are clearly the affordable answer for such GCs. Residents with lower-high economic status can afford to live there; however, the price of properties and the presence of amenities and features also differ from one gated community to another. While lower-high-income GCs remain a relatively expensive choice compared to city properties, they provide residents with security and a better lifestyle. Examples of this type of GC are El Masraweya, Al Karma.

### 3.1.4 *Affordable gated communities*

These are an exclusive economic housing development with essential amenities and small lot sizes intended for normal-income families. They vary from other GCs primarily in terms of their selling value, the minimum lot size, the developed area, the amenities and street networks provided. Many residents of these subdivisions earn too little to purchase a home in GCs or in surrounding areas, making the demand for them low. However, the number of affordable GCs is increasing today because many employees want to live in affordable homes that are close to their jobs. Examples of this type of GC are Ashgar Heights, Continental Gardens.

### 3.2 *Reasons for case study selection*

The four categories of GCs described are based on their physical features and the characteristics of lifestyle associated with each type. The following GCs were chosen as case studies: Allegría, El Rehab, Al Karma and Continental Gardens. The selected case studies are located mainly in New Cairo, Sheikh Zayed and 6th of October. The analysis was carried out by the use of observation gathering methods based on the difference in lifestyle factors that were most prominent across the GCs. These factors can be grouped under the following subcategories:

- security (gates, fences, traffic limits and social control);
- exclusivity and privacy;
- social (sense of community, social activities and relationships);
- environmental (landscape elements); and green areas
- architectural and urban character.

### 3.3 *Observations of the case studies*

The following analysis was completed by undertaking site visits, perception, a survey of GC designs and an examination of the lifestyle factors.

#### 3.3.1 *Security*

Security was seen as an important factor in choosing a residential environment. It was used to promote a lifestyle in advertising material for most of the GCs.

Figure 1 shows the security used in different GCs based on controlled gates supported by 24-hour private guards and controlled traffic. Fences surrounding the GCs also provided social control. Figure 1 indicates that developers used the different types of security to instil a sense of security. Luxurious GCs appear to have the highest level of security.

#### 3.3.2 *Exclusivity and privacy factors*

Exclusivity and privacy factors are promoted to address the needs of residents in terms of their desired lifestyle. The use of gates and walls fulfil a dual function of offering social control as well as exclusive activities, such as special sports, swimming pools, water features and landscaping. Developers create an exclusive lifestyle and offer immediate membership of a community where residents identify themselves with a social type. An exclusive lifestyle and private environment are highlighted in the slogans and images of the GCs' marketing material, so that it instils a sense of exclusiveness and privacy as a ready-made lifestyle.

Figure 2 indicates that privacy and exclusivity are more important factors in luxurious GCs than in any other types because they have the most valuable amenities. For example, Allegría has a world-class golf course.

#### 3.3.3 *Social factors*

GCs use social factors in their promotional marketing materials. They often display images of a happy family with elegant style to respond to a potential resident's emotional need for social activities, a social relationship between residents, and a sense of community.

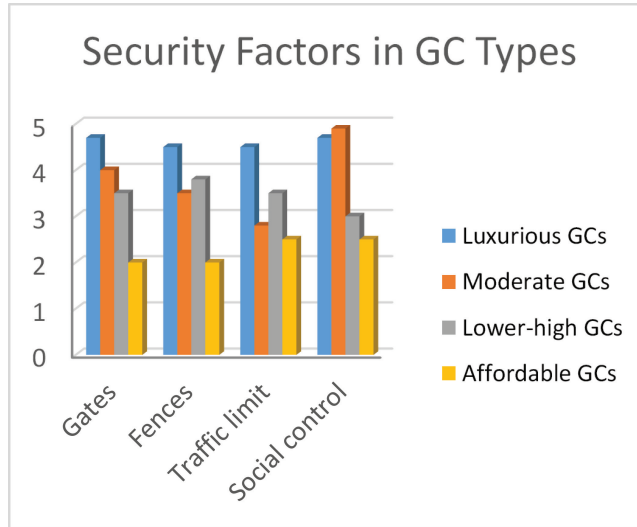


Figure 1. Percentage of security factor in each GC type.

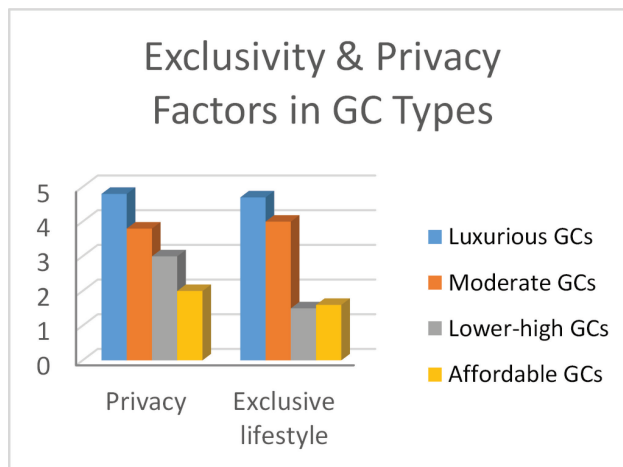


Figure 2. Percentage of exclusivity and privacy in each GC type.

Their hierarchy of open spaces that create social networks gives their residents a sense of community. As in moderate GCs (Al Rehab), building apartments are arranged in clusters and surrounded by courtyards. They are interconnected by a pedestrian network bordered by green strips which increases the social interaction between residents.

Figure 3 indicates that residents of luxurious GCs highlighted social activities as the most important social factor.

### 3.3.4 Environmental factors

The environmental factors are often displayed as green areas, richness of views, good climate and ease of maintenance in each type of GC.

Figure 4 shows the various environmental elements assessed. Green areas were present in about 70 per cent of luxurious GCs and 40 per cent of moderate GCs. The amount of green space per person decreased in affordable GCs.

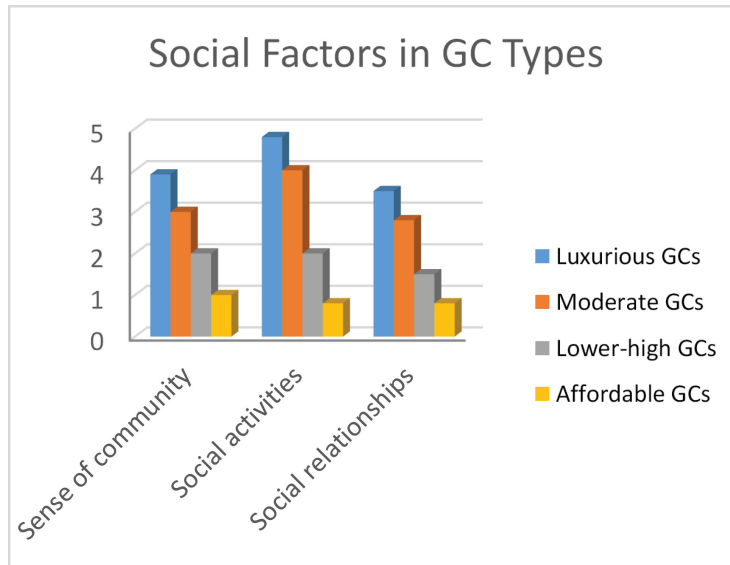


Figure 3. Percentage of social factors in each GC type.

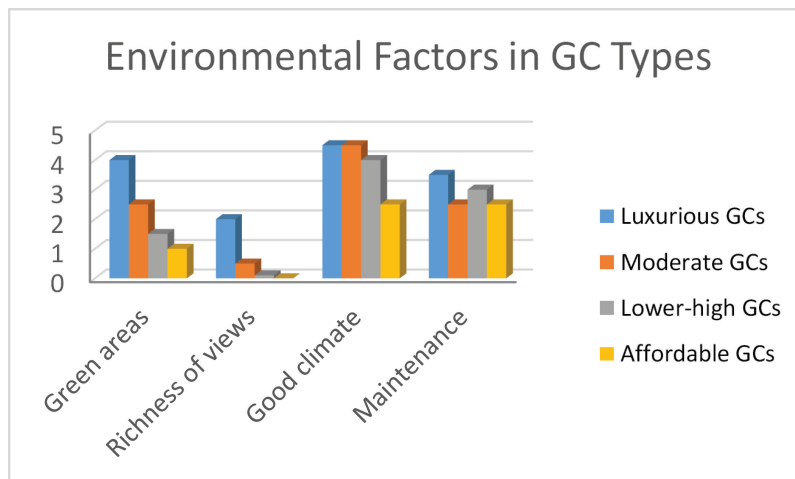


Figure 4. Percentage of environmental factors in each GC type.

### 3.3.5 Architecture and urban character factors

Urban character can be grouped under the subcategories of land use facilities, urban fabric, road network, and squares and open spaces. Figure 5 indicates that planned land use involves a variety of facilities, especially on luxurious and moderate GCs. Also, GCs Urban fabric which determines the features of the urban structure, various between linear, semi-pointed. The hierarchical road network used to define each zone depends on the design concept employed.

Architectural character elements can be grouped under the subcategories that affects the visual perception of building character, as the housing type, modernity of the architectural style, the balance of the skyline, opening shape, relation between building scale with human scale, level per apartments, quality of finishing materials, exterior paint colour, exterior texture, and porosity which indicate the ration between the opening to solid walls.

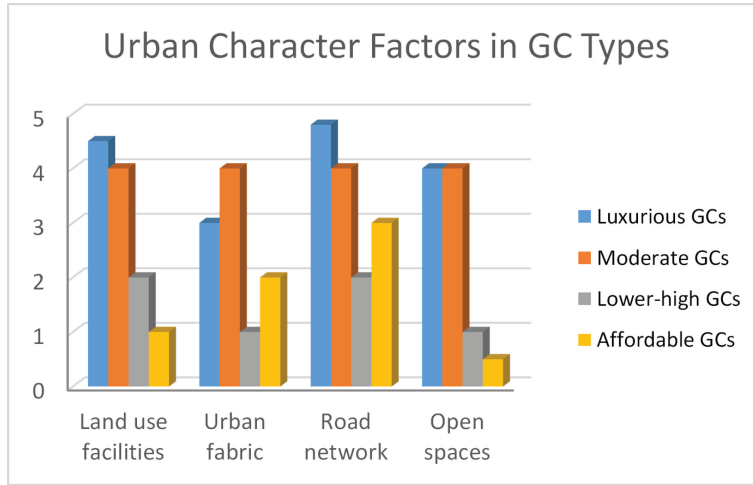


Figure 5. Percentage of urban character factors in each GC type.

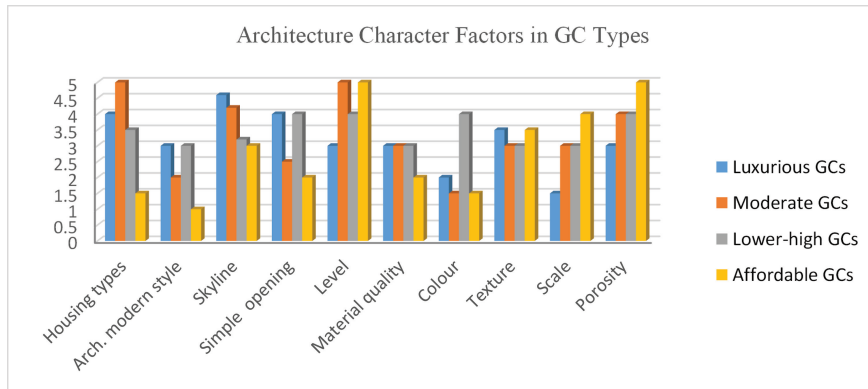


Figure 6. Percentage of architectural character factors in each GC type.

Figure 6 indicates that moderate GCs have various housing types and consists of a group of neighbourhoods each with a different design, character, and urban housing pattern. Furthermore, most of the GCs used a Western architectural style. The building ratio decreased in luxurious and moderate GCs so that they had a smooth-flowing skyline, while affordable GCs have dynamic and balanced movement in their skyline. Luxurious and lower-high GCs have the simplest of opening design shape than other GCs. The number of levels in affordable and moderate GCs ranged from four to five. The exterior material finish ranged from stone to paint, with affordable GCs using only paint; a light colour was used except for the lower-high GCs, which used darker colours. Human Intimate scale used in most of the GCs, the affordable GC have the most range of porosity than other types.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

The study concluded that developers of GCs highlighted their housing as special compared to other property. They purport to offer their residents a unique lifestyle by using the various lifestyle factors to convey a sense of community. Finally, the identity of a GC resident's has social belonging to the lifestyle offered.

Developers used lifestyle factors to promote a unique lifestyle by offering a GC property as a package for a balanced life. This encourages the audience to desire the lifestyle and sells the concept of GCs by instilling a sense of community and thus increase their investment potential.

In their promotional marketing material, GC developers highlight that their developments offer a more secure community than non-GCs. They represent GCs as a specific social environment thanks to the leisure activities provided within the community. Many of the GCs are expanding and are becoming large-scale, which actually reduces the sense of community and isolates them from the main city.

Finally, the study concluded that, theoretically, GCs have the potential to create a strong local identity as they bring citizens together with common interests. In order to establish architectural and urban identity, there are essential terms for planners, designers and policy makers:

- a comprehensive definition of urban and architectural identity, explaining the theory of identity for modern society;
- reinforcing the factors of identity and recognition;
- creating factors which reflect the urban identity and ignore meaningless elements; designing symbolic components, elements and prominent architectural signs in the built environment.
- reducing turbulence of urban features and preserving similar spaces;
- constituting close relationships between people and urban society through direct and routine contacts.

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